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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [UK](#)

SUBJECT: UK ELECTION: HUNG PARLIAMENT LOOKING MORE LIKELY

REF: A. LONDON 150 (NOTAL)

[1](#)B. 09 LONDON 2425

[1](#)C. 09 LONDON 2745 (NOTAL)

[1](#)D. 09 LONDON 2844 (NOTAL)

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Classified By: Ambassador Louis B. Susman, reasons 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C/NF) Summary. Narrowing polling data suggests the increased likelihood of a hung parliament in the UK's next general election, expected May 6. Despite small but sustained leads in the polls, the Conservative Party has not managed to seal the deal with the British electorate and faces the prospect of winning enough seats to make it the largest party in the House of Commons while failing to achieve a workable majority. Key battlegrounds will, as ever, be marginal constituencies and the ability of the parties (particularly the Conservatives) to court all-important swing voters. As the parties struggle to distinguish themselves from one another on the key election issues of housing, education, health care, the economy, and job creation, additional factors affecting swing votes will likely include voter turnout, traditional class voting, the party leaders' popularity, and how the leaders fare in the first televised debates in UK election history. The Conservatives need high turnout of their core voters PLUS a strong swing vote in order to gain a majority. Without this, a hung parliament is a strong possibility. End summary.

Polls Suggest Hung Parliament  
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[1](#)2. (C/NF) With the UK's next general election expected within 90 days (May 6 is the likely date), polls that have been broadly static for several months are beginning to suggest the increased possibility of a hung parliament in which no party wins an outright majority. Polls by YouGov and ComRes at the end of January put the Conservatives at 38 percent, down two points from December, while Labour rose one point to 31 percent, and the Liberal Democrats were up two at 19 percent. The new numbers are roughly in line with the 40-30-20 split that the Conservatives, Labour, and the Lib Dems have respectively seen in voting intentions for their parties since 2007, but the slim and fluctuating margins indicate that, despite heavy campaign spending in marginal constituencies and slick advertising, the Conservatives have yet to convince the British electorate to trust them to govern.

[1](#)3. (C/NF) The results are far from definitive: political polling in the UK has long been used as more of a short-term snapshot rather than a long-term prediction of voting intentions. The Conservatives have told us that they ideally need a 42 percent poll lead with a ten-point spread over

Labour come election day in order to secure a clear parliamentary majority (ref B). That lead could effectively slip down to 38 percent if the Tories felt they no longer had to face "anti-Conservative tactical voting" of the past (i.e. protest votes for any candidates other than the Conservative in a constituency). Despite the broadly favorable polling, Conservative confidence, and a deep campaign war chest, the Tories have failed to convince the broad electorate that David Cameron is a trustworthy alternative to Prime Minister Gordon Brown. What may result is a House of Commons with the Conservatives as the largest single party, but with insufficient numbers to reach a majority. The key question will be how well the Conservatives have courted swing voters and marginal constituencies in the run-up to the election.

#### Swing Votes Are Key

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¶4. (C/NF) In order to secure a majority of one in the House of Commons, the Conservatives need to win 117 new seats in the next election. To do this the Tories must focus heavily on convincing swing voters -- those who voted for other parties in the last election -- to come into the Conservative fold. Though the Conservatives have deployed a robust "targeted seats" campaign, supported by the party's GBP 18 million campaign fund, to attract voters in marginal constituencies or those who that have not traditionally voted Conservative in the past, the party needs to secure an overall swing of over 6.9 percent among Labour voters to gain an outright parliamentary majority (ref A). A swing this large from left to right has not occurred in British politics in the post-war era; the largest swing from Labour to Conservative since 1945 has been no more than 5.3 percent, while Labour attracted a 10.2 percent swing in its 1997

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landslide victory. Most recent Labour to Conservative swings were 3.2 and 1.8 percent in 2005 and 2001, respectively. Additionally, no government as far behind in the polls as Labour currently is has succeeded in winning a general election. While the statistics of past elections are not absolutes, they are illustrative of the difficulties both Labour and the Conservatives face this election. The polling "lead" that the Conservatives have enjoyed more-or-less steadily since the end of 2007 is misleading. If the swing the Conservatives are able to attract falls below about 6.9 percent, the result would probably translate into a hung parliament, depending on the distribution of the vote.

#### Importance of Marginal Constituencies

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¶5. (C/NF) The Labour Party has performed strongly in marginal constituencies in the last three elections. Labour's landslide victory in 1997 demonstrated the party's ability to win small majorities in marginal seats. Similarly, in the 2005 election Labour used the same formula targeting marginal constituencies -- winning 88 seats with less than a majority of 10 percent. Efficient campaigning and appeals to middle income voters have been effective Labour tools in courting marginal seats, and the question will be to what degree the Conservatives can apply this technique to draw swing votes in these constituencies.

#### The Queen's Role

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¶6. (SBU/NF) A hung parliament occurs when no party secures an absolute majority of parliamentary seats during a general election. The Queen's constitutional role after an election is to summon the leader of the majority party and invite him, as Prime Minister, to form a government. Lacking the command of a majority, the leader with the largest number of seats

would be forced to turn to smaller parties to explore coalition options. UK media has reported that the civil service has begun preparing for the possibility of a hung parliament by codifying the Queen's role in the event no party reaches majority. The Queen's advisors are in close contact with each of the parties and will be in a position to advise her in the event of a possible coalition forced by a hung parliament.

#### Key Factors Affecting the Swing

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17. (C/NF) Popularity and Timing: A number of factors will influence swing voting and the chance of a hung parliament. Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who was never elected to the post, remains uncharismatic; just a few weeks ago, he fended off a leadership challenge -- but the reluctance of his "supporters" shows. He has indicated his intention to remain at the helm of the Labour party through the election and has presided over a growing disaffection (and perhaps voter fatigue with Labour, in power since 1997) toward the government and Parliament among the electorate. Brown confidante and former Defense Secretary Des Browne told us that he did not believe there was enough time for Brown to turn things around in the remaining months before the election. Cameron's Tories, however, have not succeeded in seizing the opportunity that Brown's lack of popularity has presented. Cameron, who has regularly polled as more trustworthy and a better leader than Brown, has tried to distinguish himself from Brown on the budget by calling for an age of austerity, without detailing what cuts his government would make, and has fashioned himself as a new generation Tory, pledging to empower individuals and communities. But, if Cameron has not been able to capitalize by this late in the game, what are his chances of attracting the needed amount of swing votes by May?

18. (C/NF) First-time Debates: A new feature in the election mix is the introduction of three debates among the three party leaders once the election date has been announced. The UK's parliamentary system pits the leaders against one another each Wednesday during Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons, but presidential-style debates are new to the UK and -- coming within weeks of the election -- could play an important role among undecided and potential swing voters. As a polished and formidable public speaker and former public relations executive, Cameron stands to lose the most in the debates as expectations of his performance will

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be high. Brown, a weaker speaker whose public remarks are highly varied, will likely draw or do slightly better than expected. Labour insiders have told us the key for Brown will be not to appear angry or grumpy during the debates, as he is often perceived by the public. The telegenic Lib Dem leader Nick Clegg -- the least recognizable of the three -- will do relatively well simply by virtue of being included.

19. (C/NF) Class Voting and Turnout: UK voters tend to revert to their traditional party allegiances as an election nears -- despite what they have told pollsters about their voting intentions in the pre-election period. While voters no longer distinguish themselves strictly along the ideological lines of the 1970s and 80s -- socialists versus capitalists -- there remain strong class ties to voting patterns. A key trend to watch in this election will be whether working class voters are prepared to swing from their traditional support of Labour in favor of the Conservatives' "fixing broken Britain" manifesto -- in other words, whether Tory plans to encourage smaller and more accountable government, empower communities, promote law and order, and ensure personal and fiscal responsibility translate into votes from the working class. A second factor will be whether the Conservatives are able to make inroads into middle income Lib Dem

constituencies. The Tories are banking on a strategy to attract these working and middle class voters to deliver the needed 6.9 percent swing; if they fall short, so will the party's majority.

¶10. (C/NF) Turnout in the last election in 2005 was 61.4 percent nationally. If turnout remains at this level while polling still suggests a 40/30/20 split across the parties, political observers believe the result will be a hung parliament. Between 1945 and 1997, UK turnout was roughly between 71-83 percent; 2001 turnout fell to 59.4 percent, and rose again in 2005 to 61.4 percent. A key determinant is whether voter disaffection with the Labour government and particularly with PM Brown will be enough to reverse the turnout trend and bring voters to the polls in sufficiently large numbers that -- combined with an adequate swing nationally or in marginal seats -- will push Cameron over the top.

Comment

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¶11. (C/NF) Though current polling numbers suggest it would be difficult for the Conservatives to win outright, the election has always been theirs to lose. Typically, the Tories (whose core supporters are regular and committed voters) hope for low turnout in elections as it suggests that Labour and Lib Dem voters have stayed home. This year, however, with the polls indicating only a relatively modest Conservative lead, Cameron needs the almost impossible combination of high voter turnout and a sizable swing vote. His party is hoping that Labour's low popularity and the Tories' "targeted seats" campaign might be enough to produce a clean win for the Conservatives. Shortfalls in either of these variables will point to a hung parliament and the need for Cameron to search for coalition partners among the third parties.

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